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SUBJECT: PRT DHI QAR HOSTS NUNCIO AT INTERFAITH PROVINCIAL  
GATHERING

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11. (U) This is a PRT Dhi Qar reporting cable.

12. (SBU) Summary. The Papal Nuncio visited Ur on October 23 accompanied by senior Embassy officials. Although weather conditions compressed the party's time on the ground, it had the opportunity to meet with the small Christian community, which has fallen on hard times, and join in a lunch with the leading members of Dhi Qar's various communities, including the Governor. Of particular significance was the presence of Sayyid Majeed Thayef Al-Sahlan, the representative of Ayatollah Sistani in the province. The visit demonstrated that the leadership of Nasiriyah is interested in deepening ties with the international community and is keen to play a visible role in promoting good relations with Iraq's religious minorities. It also suggests that PRTs can successfully play a facilitating role in organizing interfaith events. End summary.

13. (SBU) On October 23, the Papal Nuncio arrived in Tallil on a whirlwind visit to Ur, the ruined city of Abraham and Sarah. A cross-section of Dhi Qar's community leaders warmly welcomed the Nuncio and his party at the reception rooms in the shadow of Ur's 4,000 year-old Great Ziggurat. The Shia religious establishment was represented by Sayyid Majeed Thayef Al-Sahlan, representative of Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in Dhi Qar, and Sayyids Thayef Al-Sahlan and Khalid Al-Yaseri. Dhi Qar Governor Aziz Kadum Alwan Al-Ogheli (ISCI) and LTC Falah Kadim, Commander of the Police Joint Operations Center, represented the Provincial Government. Sitting beside the Governor was Sheikh Talib al-Harbi, a popular tribal leader considered by some of our contacts as a possible candidate for governor in the next election, and his retinue. Dhi Qar's small but prosperous Mandaean community was represented by its Head, Dr. Samer Naeem Handal. The Nuncio was particularly solicitous of the two Chaldean Catholic families that comprise the remnant of Nasiriyah's Christian community. The Nuncio had the opportunity to speak with each set of community leaders, and appeared to particularly enjoy his conversation with the Sayyids.

14. (SBU) Equally notable was the respectful and positive interaction of the guests. After the Nuncio's departure, Al-Sahlan, the representative of Ayatollah Sistani, emphasized to Team Leader his respect for and fellowship with the "old families" of the Mandaean and Christian communities, who were very much part of Dhi Qar's social fabric. He expressed an interest in working with the PRT to address the needs of the poor in the community. The mutual respect demonstrated by reception participants augured well for the future of community relations and provided a glimpse into one possible shape that Iraq's future could take. The presence of the Shi'a clerics was in large part due to the intercession of LTC Kadim, who conveyed the PRT's invitation to them.

15. (SBU) The Chaldean Catholic community in Nasiriyah, never numerous, fell onto particularly hard times twenty years ago.

Its two families are headed by Douglas Stanley, ironically the Director of Nasiriyah's Islamic Bank, and the construction entrepreneur Gamal Tobia, still considered a newcomer in Nasiriya despite nearly a lifetime of residence.

Chaldean numbers - essentially the extended Stanley clan--once constituted a sufficient population to justify a visit by a priest twice a year. However, Iran-Iraq War deaths and emigration reduced the community's number to less than a dozen individuals, leaving behind the older generation, the very young, and the handicapped. They worship in Basra once a month.

16. (SBU) The Nuncio was accompanied by Gordon Senior Advisor for Southern Affairs Gordon Gray, Deputy Political Counselor and poloff. Low-key in his approach, the Nuncio demonstrated personal charm and appeared comfortable while conversing with guests and patient with the press. Evidently expecting an inspection of the dry bones of a city abandoned more than two millennia ago, he showed surprise at and appeared gratified by the warmth and animation of the reception. With the weather cutting the visit from five hours to two, the party made a brief climb up the Ziggurat of Ur before departing Tallil for Baghdad.

17. (SBU) Comment: The visit is the first by the current Papal Nuncio to Nasiriyah and generated remarkable interest among PRT contacts in Dhi Qar. Provincial community leaders are keen on receiving diplomatic and other international visitors and are quite capable of putting aside any differences to do so. We realize, too, that such visits give us credibility by opening doors to new ties, sources of cooperation, or business opportunities. The respect we saw at the reception gives us hope for the future of

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intercommunal dialogue in the province. We look forward to identifying common interests to encourage further bridge-building. Its success is also testament to the strong reputation the PRT has built up in the province for being even-handed between communities and supportive of community priorities. End comment.

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